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ABSTRACT

This article describes FLTEACH, the Foreign Language Teaching Forum on the Listserv computer Internet service running from the computer at State University of New York at Buffalo. FLTEACH is a forum for communication for foreign language teachers at the elementary, secondary, and tertiary levels. Initially started for New York teachers, it has expanded into a national and international communication effort. The rationale and goals of FLTEACH are described, and its current and potential uses are outlined. It can serve as an educational helper for training and classroom preparation as well as an archive system. How to join FLTEACH, and e-mail in general, is reviewed, and actual uses are described. It is hoped that the more foreign language teachers who use FLTEACH, the more cohesion and integration the foreign language educational community will experience. Two appendixes offer on line computer and address information for networking with program developers. (Contains 14 references.) (NAV)

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"Networking" with foreign language colleagues: Professional development on the internet

Jean W. LeLoup and Robert Ponterio

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"Networking" with Foreign Language Colleagues: Professional Development on the Internet

Jean W. LeLoup and Robert Ponterio, SUNY College, Cortland

Introduction

One of the most rapidly developing technological advancements in our society today is the use of electronic means of communication, e.g., the Internet. New communication technology is of prime interest to foreign language (FL) professionals because communication is the primary thrust and emphasis in FL teaching, and these technologies have the potential to put FL learners in direct contact with native speakers. The ramifications of this technology for us in the profession are far-reaching and exciting, but many FL practitioners have yet either to discover or venture into this new area. Thus, this vast and powerful new resource remains, at this writing, largely untapped by a particular group of educators who could benefit greatly from it. Given the fact that this technology is not a passing fancy, it behooves FL professionals to explore the endless possibilities available to them now through electronic airways that will enhance their knowledge, their professional development, their teaching, and consequently the learning of their students.

FLTEACH, the Foreign Language Teaching Forum, is an outgrowth of activity of FL educators investigating the possible professional and pedagogical uses of electronic communication on the Internet. FLTEACH is a Listserv list that was founded February 1st of 1994 and is running on a computer at SUNY/Buffalo. A Listserv list is an ongoing electronic discussion between and among people with similar interests. In this case, FLTEACH is intended to serve as a forum for communication among FL teachers at the elementary, secondary, and tertiary levels. Its members and targeted audience are any and all FL educators in general including methodologists, university supervisors, cooperating teachers in junior and senior high schools, and student teachers. Essentially, all language teachers involved in developing or implementing a FL curriculum or engaged in the certification process have a vested interest in the dialogue on this list. The initial purpose of the list was to provide a forum for language teaching issues in New York State, but FLTEACH quickly developed a much broader base. Teachers have now subscribed from all over the United States and from eleven (at this writing) foreign countries. Even in its infancy, the list has evolved into a tool for discussing issues, raising concerns, and solving common problems that are germane to the FL community at regional, national, and international levels.

This article will indicate the rationale for and goals of FLTEACH, as well as enumerate many of its uses thus far and possibilities for uses in the future. Information to help get started using FLTEACH, including necessary support systems and the procedure for subscribing, will also be discussed. Included as well are comments from list members attesting to the usefulness of FLTEACH in their professional lives. Finally, some sample postings from the list will be offered as an example of what a FL professional can look forward to as a member of FLTEACH. It is hoped that readers will realize the benefits of participating in the professional discussion of the list and will add to the shared dialogue about mutual interests and concerns in the FL field.

Rationale

At the beginning of this decade, America 2000: An Educational Strategy was published. This booklet was a delineation of the long-term national strategy proposed by the President and state governors at their Educational Summit in Charlottsville, Virginia in 1989. The strategy was designed to accomplish six national educational goals, and the entire thrust of this meeting and resultant document has been since referred to as either "America 2000" or "Goals 2000." The goals have far-reaching consequences for all schools at all levels and for all subject areas. The impact on and ramifications for FL curricula have been much discussed in the ensuing years. One of the principal mandates of this discussion avers that "colleges and universities should promote cooperative arrangements between elementary, secondary and postsecondary institutions in order to improve language instruction at all levels and to facilitate sequential learning" (American Council on Education, p. 4).

Consonant with the national "Goals 2000" is a report generated by the New York State (NYS) University system entitled SUNY 2000. The major thrust of this report focuses on college entry-level knowledge and skills expected of all entering freshmen. This document sets forth high expectations from disciplines across the curriculum, including foreign language. The task force responsible for drafting this report, while recognizing "the growing importance of the ability to communicate well in a second language" (NYS, SUNY 2000, p. 27), also notes that "foreign language instruction in the United States is woefully inadequate to meet these needs" (SUNY 2000, p. 27). As partial amelioration of this situation, the report makes a strong recommendation for close collaboration between FL faculty at the secondary and tertiary level. Implicit here is the need for articulation between these levels—precisely the goal of the teleconference "Bridging the Gap," in which NYS FL professionals from both levels participated in October of 1993. Numerous follow-up meetings have attempted to facilitate this articulation, to the end of realizing the SUNY 2000 goals in FL departments across the state.

Another important initiative in NYS directed at the advancement and coordination of standards in FL curricula is the work of the Board of Regents Committee for Review of Curriculum and Assessment for Languages Other Than English (LOTE). The Interim Report of the LOTE Committee (Benitez, et al.) espouses many of the same goals as SUNY 2000 in terms of FL curricula, and once again articulation is viewed as a necessary component to ensure success. Taking articulation as a basic premise of both these documents, the teleconference was an initial step toward bridging the gap in communication among FL professionals. Nevertheless, "a gap still does exist" (Jeffries, p. 7). It is wide, and many FL educators need to be brought together to close it. Closer collaboration among FL professionals was also called for in the keynote speech by Claire Jackson at the annual NYSAFLT Spring Colloquium (1994). As director of the Articulation and Achievement Project out of Framingham, Massachusetts, she spoke of the work toward developing common frameworks for the FL profession that will unify and assist us in our shared and concerted effort toward improved FL instruction, articulation, assessment, and overall student learning. The goals of articulation and collaboration, continually mandated by these documents and leaders in the FL profession, have ramifications for every school district, college, and university nationwide that offers a FL curriculum. The implied number of FL practitioners involved is vast. Initiation of a dialogue among these educators in order to foster communication that would lead to the desired articulation has become a priority. The question then is how to accomplish these goals in the most efficient, effective, and all-encompassing manner?

The impetus for FLTEACH, thus, came from a real necessity to unite as a profession and engage in productive discussions about common issues. It fills a void, as no prior list expressly addressed the FL educator community across such a broad spectrum. It also provides a useful service to the FL profession for many reasons. First, because it disseminates messages so quickly, a "list" is a most expedient way to initiate contact and spur discussion among FL professionals that can eventually lead to more communication at all levels and, hence, better articulation of FL curricula and goals. Next, the technology for such a list already exists, and access to electronic mail is rapidly becoming as essential as access to postal mail and telephone service. Also, FL educators are a ready-made clientele with their common interests and aims. In addition, it makes good sense to pool and share resources instead of constantly "re-inventing the wheel." Coordination of preservice FL teacher education, leading to uniformity in expected professional knowledge base and skills, is another benefit that can result from the list. Finally, the list can provide a network of moral and professional support and stimulation such as that obtained by conference attendance, but on a much more frequent basis. For these major reasons and many more, FLTEACH began as a fledgling in February of 1994 and has grown steadily ever since.

Goals

The goals of FLTEACH are as numerous as the reasons for its existence. They have also changed and expanded since its inception. A summary of the principle goals of FLTEACH reiterates the threads of its rationale. Primary is the emphasis on overall increased communication among FL professionals. The importance of this contact is echoed in the comments of subscribers who see the list as a daily "must" in their professional lives (see Appendix D). The benefits of daily or weekly contact in a productive forum with one's colleagues are endless and only limited by one's own imagination and participation.

Parallel, of necessity, to the goal of expanded communication among professionals is an increase in the access to electronic media by elementary and secondary teachers. Tertiary faculty typically have relatively easy access to electronic media that is paid for by their institutions, but practitioners at other levels are not generally so fortunate. Obviously, if any articulation and coordination are to take place, all levels must be significantly represented. Also, the increase of technology awareness on the part of FL practitioners can only enhance their teaching and effectiveness as educators (cf. Knight; LeLoup & Ponterio, "FLTEACH", "Networking"). Use of technology by FL professionals can also lead eventually to better training of their students in the use of electronic communications across the curriculum.

Coordination, convergence, and perhaps consensus in preservice FL education is certainly a major goal of FLTEACH. ACTFL has indicated teacher education as a priority in this decade (Knop; Sandstedt; Strasheim). In general, FL methods courses appear to consider much of the same knowledge base as important (Grosse). How much better would preservice training be if it were coordinated and improved by collegial sharing of resources and materials? Already, FL methodologists are sharing ideas and exchanging points of view on many curricular issues. One goal of FLTEACH is eventually to archive FL methods course syllabi, resulting in a true pooling of talents and perspectives to the end of unifying the knowledge base that guides FL practitioners.

The articulation so necessary to a smooth transition for FL learners between educational levels can only be improved by knowing how other colleagues are implementing FL curricula across the nation and even around the world. FL educators participating on FLTEACH can discover what their counterparts are doing in many different areas, and all can capitalize on shared information and ideas. A sampling of the exchanges on FLTEACH (see Appendix C) provides a good example of the types of dialogue, information exchange, and general collegiality on the list.

The Basics: Getting access to e-mail

The first requisite for joining FLTEACH is to establish an electronic mail (e-mail) connection—i.e., access to the electronic pathways that connect the world. There are so many ways to get access to e-mail that we will briefly describe just the basics. In order to have e-mail, you need a service provider, a terminal, and some way to connect the two. The service provider might be your own school's computer, a regional educational service, or a private company such as America OnLine, CompuServe, Delphi, Genie, AT&T-Mail, MCI-Mail, etc.

You or your school will certainly pay something for the connection but the price

might be calculated in any number of ways. For an account of your own on a commercial service, costs might be calculated by the hour or by the amount of data exchanged. However, there might be no additional costs for adding an account to a large school's computer. Thus the cost will depend on your own particular situation, and in many cases they can be absorbed by your school or district.

Once you have an account, you need to be able to connect to the service. At school you might use a computer that is connected by a single permanent line, but more probably you will have access on a LAN (Local Area Network) in a computer lab or on a computer in your classroom or office that is connected by a cable (perhaps ethernet) or by a telephone line and a modem. If you are dialing in from home, you almost certainly need a modem connected to the telephone line. In this case you should probably get a modem that matches or exceeds the top speed of the service provider: 2400, 9600 or 14400 baud. Faster is definitely better. The modem can be internal or external. This is often a matter of personal preference unless you do not have room for an internal modem or a free serial port (COM or communications port) for an external modem. If you are not sure, get some help.

Next, you require a terminal that will be connected to the service. This will probably be a personal computer of some kind. Chances are that your service provider will be able to help you select and configure communications software that will make your computer connect to the service, or the provider may even give you the software that you need. In many cases the choice of software is also a matter of personal preference, but it is wise to remember that a colleague who uses the same software can be a valuable resource when getting started or when things go wrong.

For a teacher, the first thing to do is to see if your school can already provide an account. Ask around; check with the local computer guru, science teachers, and librarians to see what e-mail connection might be supported by your school or school district. The school might supply all of the necessary equipment or just the connection. You might need to request a telephone line and a computer in your classroom. If funding is not readily available from your school, you might look into the possibility of writing a grant to enable your school to purchase the equipment. If your school does not offer e-mail, ask why not. Electronic communications has now become a basic professional tool. If you cannot get the connection through work, you should investigate commercial providers that have local access numbers or 1-800 access. Be sure to compare prices and to take telephone charges and time during which your telephone will be tied up into account. If you will be paying either long distance telephone charges or the e-mail service based on the time you are connected to the system, you should inquire about reading and composing messages off-line, i.e., while you are not connected to the telephone line. It is often possible to have your computer dial the service, quickly get all of your mail, and disconnect. Then the software will allow you to read the mail, answer messages, and write your own letters while you are not connected to the service. Your computer can then call the service, quickly send your messages, and drop the connection. This technique can result in significant savings.

Making the initial connection can be confusing for a novice because there are so many pieces to the puzzle. Everything could work just fine right out of the box, but chances are that some element will need "tweaking." Having someone to turn to, be it a colleague or a commercial provider, can save a lot of time and frustration. Even if you need to pay someone at your local computer store to set things up, the investment can be well worth the time saved.

Once the connection is established you should learn how to use the basic features of your system. Know your address. It probably has the form: name@domain, with "domain" being the address of your server. An example of an e-mail address is:

ponterior@snycorva.cortland.edu

You need to be able to SEND messages, READ messages, and REPLY to messages on your particular system. Always include a "signature" to be sure that your correspondent knows your name and e-mail address. When asking friends, colleagues, and support staff for help remember that on different systems, commands do not always function in the same way. What works on America OnLine might not work on PROFS or Vax mail.

Currently, at least one state in the northeast has a program in place to make Internet e-mail connections available to elementary and secondary school teachers (cf. LeLoup & Ponterio, "FLTEACH"). The amount of support furnished by this state typically depends on agreements with local school districts and ranges from provision of local access, software, and training to computers and modems. It would be well-worth investigating to see if such a program or plan exists in your state. As this type of technology becomes more and more a given in teaching and the classroom, state departments of education will realize the necessity of providing this service for their teachers if they wish to keep abreast of developments in their field and maximize teaching efficacy.

Subscribing to FLTEACH

Once an electronic (Internet or Bitnet) connection is established, subscription to FLTEACH is relatively simple. The directions are given in Appendix A. A "welcome message" is the initial mailing and contains useful information for participating on the list, as well as various options that members may choose. These include receiving messages in a daily batch, searching archived materials, and stopping and restarting mail before and after vacations. Subscribers are also asked to fill in a brief template for biographical information that is made available to the entire list. In this way, members can pinpoint others of similar interests, projects, and languages, as well as geographic proximity. Logs of all messages sent on the list are available to subscribers so periodic absence from the list does not preclude remaining apprised of pertinent information.

Once members have subscribed, they may participate freely in any number of ways. Some participants post frequently or even regularly, while some opt to glean whatever appeals to them from the daily interactions without making their presence vocally known. Internet "stage fright" is a real obstacle for many people, and learning the

protocols of "netiquette" takes some time and effort. Nevertheless, little or no e-mail acumen should not be a deterrent to participation: members of FLTEACH run the gamut in terms of electronic sophistication. The list co-managers encourage postings from all who wish to join the discussions, and they are happy to provide technical assistance to do so when needed. Even the subscription directions may seem baffling to those who are truly neophytes to the Internet. Please address any questions about subscription procedures to the co-managers. They can be contacted at the e-mail or regular mail addresses listed in Appendix B.

Uses of FLTEACH: An Overview

At this point, you may think this all sounds nice but terribly complicated and not really worth the effort. Please read on! FLTEACH is useful to all FL professionals in a myriad of ways. It is a method of participating in continuous professional development from many perspectives. Frequent postings of conferences, seminars, and workshops keep members current on what is available for them to renew or acquire new professional skills and knowledge. FLTEACH is also an "on-line" consultant for any questions FL educators may have regarding teaching methods, ideas for varying presentations, ancillary materials, theoretical concerns, and even queries stemming from personal circumstances (e.g., on whether and how to raise children bilingually).

FL teachers who use technology to enhance their teaching are serving as role models for their students, all of whom will need to develop this competence for their future. For those students who will go on to become FL teachers in their own right, an excellent example is being set by the teachers who open their eyes to the wonders, advantages, and possibilities of technology in the FL classroom. FL teachers can discover links to target language (TL) resources, countries, and colleagues that will broaden their knowledge base and provide a method of infusing a TL reality that is motivational and meaningful to students.

Uses of FLTEACH: Some Examples

A cursory sampling of topics that have been broached on FLTEACH during its first six months will, perhaps, give an idea of the breadth of information available to members. It will also hopefully generate new thoughts for and uses of FLTEACH for the future. The following list of topics serves as an index to many subjects that were discussed to varying depths and degrees on FLTEACH. A few excerpted dialogues have been included in Appendix C to provide an idea of what some typical exchanges and postings might resemble. The range of topics is wide, from information about student trips and recommended sponsors to esoteric theoretical discussions. Requests for opinions about FL software, textbooks, summer immersion programs, and language camps are posted and answered regularly. The ACTFL Articulation and Achievement Learning Outcomes Framework is another topic that has appeared, along with extensive discussions about articulation between and among levels of FL teaching, placement at the college level, and many of the concerns voiced during the "Bridging the Gap" teleconference. Another extensive and technical discussion centered around the parameters of the ideal language laboratory. Considerable discussion ensued following an inquiry about when and how to begin FL instruction to young children. Many members participated in a lengthy dialogue centered around Krashen's "Pleasure Hypothesis," an idea presented at the Northeast Conference in April, 1994, in New York City. Methodologies and their application to the classroom have also elicited numerous comments—from Counseling Learning to contextualization.

In addition, FLTEACH members have requested advice on dealing with problems specific to the FL field. Concerns about shifting FL enrollments from one language to another have been addressed. Misunderstandings and faulty communication lines between administration and FL practitioners have been broached. Solutions are not always readily forthcoming, but having a forum in which to air grievances has been helpful to many members. Also, several members are "singleton" FL teachers in their schools, and FLTEACH is a valuable support system for these professionals.

Frequently, subscribers will request assistance in planning and presenting projects in their FL classrooms. One such example is a request for help and ideas on producing a play with students (see Appendix C). The responses to this posting were quite numerous, varied, interesting, and exciting. Often responses to individual requests are summarized and re-posted on the list for the benefit of all members. For example, several members were interested in acquiring information about possibilities for international pen pals. A subscriber posted the electronic address for Intercultural E-mail Exchanges (iecc@stolaf.edu) so these members could contact the appropriate organization and get started with their respective projects.

Another service of FLTEACH is to take material that is of potential interest to many members and archive it for future reference. One example is a "how to" paper on e-mail pen pals, written by one member, Adolph Hofmann, which was made available in the FLTEACH archives. Another useful file of archived material is a list of FL lists (Bedell), locating other lists of interest to FL professionals and giving them even greater access to professional discussions on a variety of topics. Members will also find useful a contribution of information on federal grants that are specific to FL interests (Hilburn). In addition, new or vacationing members can "catch up" on postings they have missed by searching the archives for the logs of all previous messages. These archives can be easily searched by keyword.

Perhaps one of the most successful aspects of FLTEACH is the diversity of its membership. Although it began with the intention of serving the particular audience of FL teachers primarily in NYS, it has very rapidly grown to have a national and even international base. FLTEACH also happily has members from all educational levels, a characteristic that can only aid in its goal of articulation (see Appendix C).

Conclusion

Through using FLTEACH, the foreign language educational community has an opportunity to become a more integrated, cohesive group in terms of professional goals, aims, and direction. Continuous contact with colleagues on the list will inevitably result in a better-informed and prepared cadre of FL practitioners that can further the objectives of foreign language education in local, regional, national, and international venues and at all educational levels. Though initial access and acculturation may be a challenge and may appear to be quite time-consuming, the ensuing rewards will more than make up for the time invested at the beginning. We FL professionals should know, better than most, that useful learning is often a long-term process. Just as FL proficiency is not attained with a mere year or two of study, neither will one or two hours in front of the computer make e-mail experts out of all of us. It will take some time and effort for those new to the world of computers and the Internet to feel at ease on the technological superhighway, but the results will be extremely valuable. Indeed, many members claiming little to no previous technological or e-mail acumen testify to becoming total converts and wondering how they ever managed before. Other subscribers have indicated how useful to and how much a part of their professional life FLTEACH has become. Hopefully, the reader has been convinced of the worth of becoming technologically aware and of participating in the discussions on FLTEACH as components of continuing professional development. The more we FL educators collaborate and strive for professional improvement together, the sooner we will achieve our common FL educational goals.

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APPENDIX A

TO SUBSCRIBE TO FLTEACH, FOLLOW THESE DIRECTIONS:

Send an e-mail message to:

LISTSERV@UBVM.CC.BUFFALO.EDU

Put nothing in the subject line.

The message itself should contain only the following single line beginning at the left margin:

SUB FLTEACH firstname lastname

(Example: SUB FLTEACH JANE DOE)

Then send the message. Be sure not to include a signature.

APPENDIX B

Co-managers of FLTEACH are:

Jean W. LeLoup/Robert Ponterio
Dept. of International Communications and Culture
SUNY/Cortland
P.O. Box 2000
Cortland, NY 13045

They may also be reached by e-mail as follows:

LELOUPJ@SNYCORVA.CORTLAND.EDU

PONTERIOR@SNYCORVA.CORTLAND.EDU

Address any questions to the co-managers at the addresses above or to:

FLTEACH@SNYCORVA.CORTLAND.EDU